

Chapter 7

Municipal Complex Property Master Plan

INTRODUCTION

This chapter of the Wylie Parks, Recreation and Open Space Master Plan focuses on land use planning for the Municipal Complex Property – an area of the city largely defined by its diverse array of beautiful natural habitat and its central location within Wylie. However, this area is also defined by its future as the civic core of Wylie. With the establishment of the new signature City Hall, Library, and Recreation Center on the site, the Municipal Complex Property has the potential to become a unique and vibrant area within the community. Set against the backdrop of a wall of large trees growing along a creek corridor, one gets a sense that the new civic complex is a hub of activity that lends itself to becoming a key focal point of the city.



This Municipal Complex Property Master Plan is intended to function as a long-range guide for the preservation and recreational development of this area while supporting the development and activity occurring at the new civic complex. While beyond the scope of this Master Plan, it is important to consider that the energy created by the civic complex will spur continued development in and around the Municipal Complex Property. Through careful planning, however, surrounding development can be guided in a way that balances the benefits of economic development with the importance of preserving, maintaining, and enhancing our quickly-disappearing natural landscapes for the greater good of the surrounding community.

MASTER PLANNING PROCESS

In developing the Municipal Complex Property Master Plan, the Planning Team performed a site analysis, conducted a program analysis, developed alternatives, and prepared the final Master Plan as shown toward the end of this chapter. The site analysis included examining site features and characteristics such as topography, vegetation, existing and proposed development and infrastructure, hydrology, and view corridors. This information led to a greater understanding of the site's opportunities and constraints which in turn informed an analysis of various programmatic options. From the site and program analysis, alternatives for the Municipal Complex Property were developed. Each of these alternatives explored different approaches of how to best preserve the quality and character of the Municipal Complex Property while providing quality recreational amenities which will support and be supported by the new civic complex. These various analysis and alternatives tasks, along with three preliminary design reviews with City Officials and City Staff, all contributed to the ultimate site plan for the property, which merges preservation of the natural environment, provision of recreational opportunities, and guidance for quality urban development.

SITE ANALYSIS

To arrive at the land use plan for the Municipal Complex Property, the Planning Team, in conjunction with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), conducted a series of analyses, both of the site itself and through the use of conceptual diagramming. To truly understand and appreciate the varying features of any site it is necessary to physically walk, explore, and experience with all of the senses what is special about that place, which in the case of the Municipal Complex Property, proved to be a delightful experience. The Planning Team visited the site on October 21, 2008 and was deeply impressed with what the site has to offer.

A Vegetative and Physical Analysis

The Municipal Complex Property provides a present-day snapshot of different habitats ranging from former corn fields to upland forests to pastures and hay meadows, resulting from past agricultural practices. It is possible this is reflective of over 100 years of management which has now led to most of the site being dominated by herbaceous cover. In addition, the site is also shaped by surrounding new development including neighborhoods, buildings, dams, and roads, each contributing in its own way to the opportunities and constraints of the property.

Vegetative Analysis

Upland Forests

Possibly undisturbed due to the steeper slopes associated with water channels throughout the site, the areas surrounding the creeks have been left alone for at least a century and are now supporting mature upland forests. The presence of dead and dying bois d'arc trees in this



area suggests that this was originally a bois d'arc savanna that is now largely replaced by cedar elm, green ash, and hackberry trees. One highly remarkable and attractive feature of these forests is the openness of the understory. Consequently, management of the area should be focused on preservation, removal of invasive species, and thinning of forest saplings and woody vines to ensure this extremely valuable landscape remains well-suited for hike and bike trails. Management of the adjacent land outside the forest is critical for the continued high level of quality expressed in this environment. Buffer strips should be considered along the perimeter of the Upland Forests which would allow for maintaining a wildlife corridor as well as providing a protective buffer to prevent unwanted encroachment and the negative impacts associated with such encroachment.

Figure 7.1
Site Analysis Map



Pastures and Hay Meadows

The area labeled East Meadow is largely characterized by introduced vegetation such as coastal Bermuda, King Ranch bluestem, and Johnson grass. This combined with actual skeletal remains of cattle suggest that these areas were once used as fields for livestock grazing. Remnants of native tall grasses are present, however, likely from the pre-settlement era when these fields would have been dominated by little bluestem. Maintaining this herbaceous character would be possible by mowing every two to three years, burning every several years, or cutting and grubbing woody saplings that quickly move into it. Interestingly, an approximately 5 acre section labeled "Forest Succession" is rich in silver bluestem, early succession native prairie grasses, and invading eastern red cedar trees. These characteristics are typical of the ecological process of transitioning toward a forest habitat dominated by conifer trees.



Former Corn Fields

Until approximately 2006, the areas labeled Central and West Meadow were plowed and planted with row crops. After the planting came to an end, broadleaf herbaceous plants would have most likely been the first to fill the void created by cessation of agricultural crops. In this area, Johnson grass is expected to increase in abundance without management, but since there is little well established perennial vegetation, prairie restoration could take place with a high expectation for success.



Physical Analysis

Walking the Site

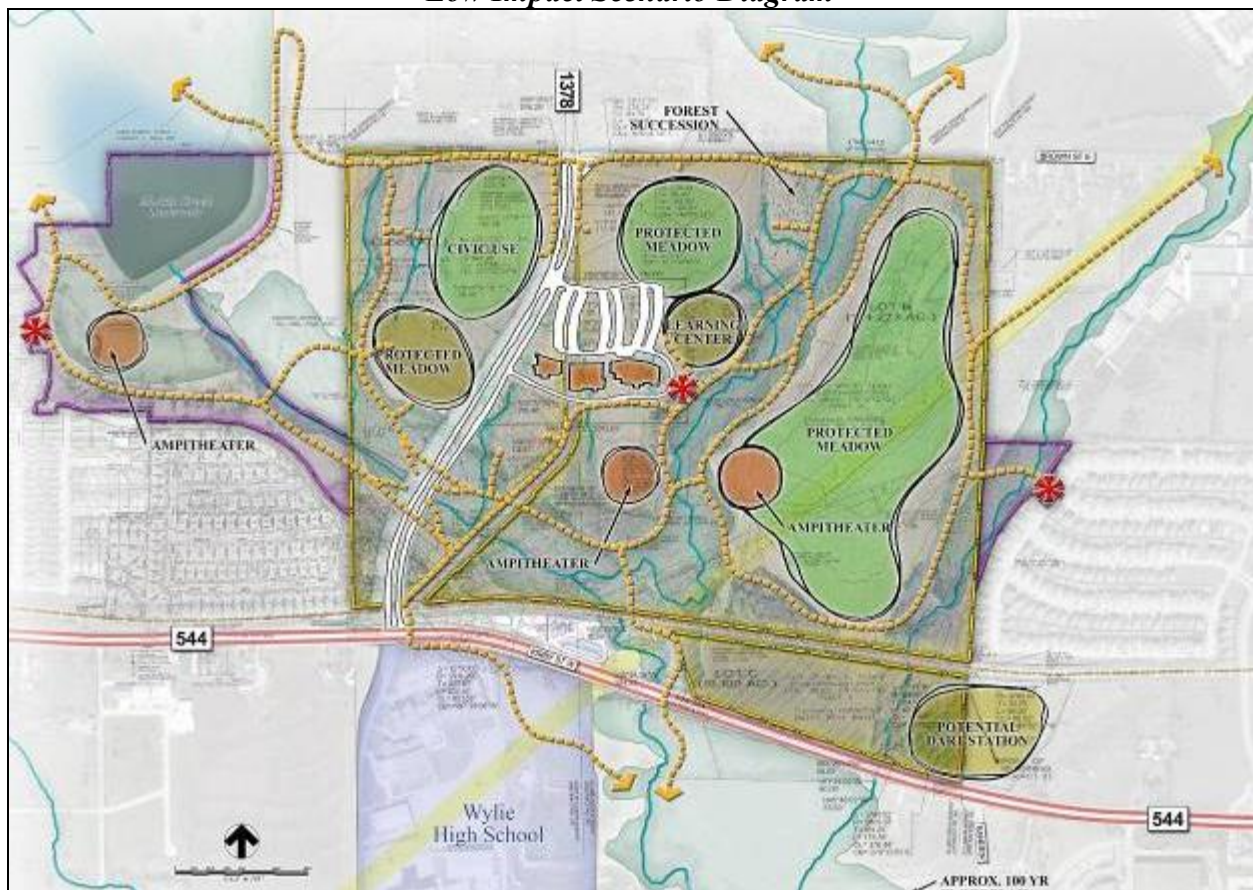
The Municipal Complex Property is naturally defined by the creek corridors that run through the site, but the influences of man are becoming very apparent. Starting with the new civic complex at the heart of the property, one can see how its setting in middle of the Central Meadow gives prominence to the structures. As one walks down to the creek corridor below, it is possible to move almost effortlessly through the trees due to the absence of any significant understory. The large mature trees rise up from the forest floor like columns and create a very enjoyable experience along the clear waters of the creek. Standing outside the forest in one of the many concave nooks, a sense of safety and security is felt and the gently sloping terrain suggests that an amphitheater would be ideal in one of these locations. Walking in the East Meadow, which is intersected by large power lines, the tendency is for one to skirt the edges of the forest, already hinting on a route that a trail may take. From the Muddy Creek Reservoir dam, the civic complex development is clearly visible above the treetops as well as a wonderful panoramic vista of much of the city itself.



PROGRAM ANALYSIS

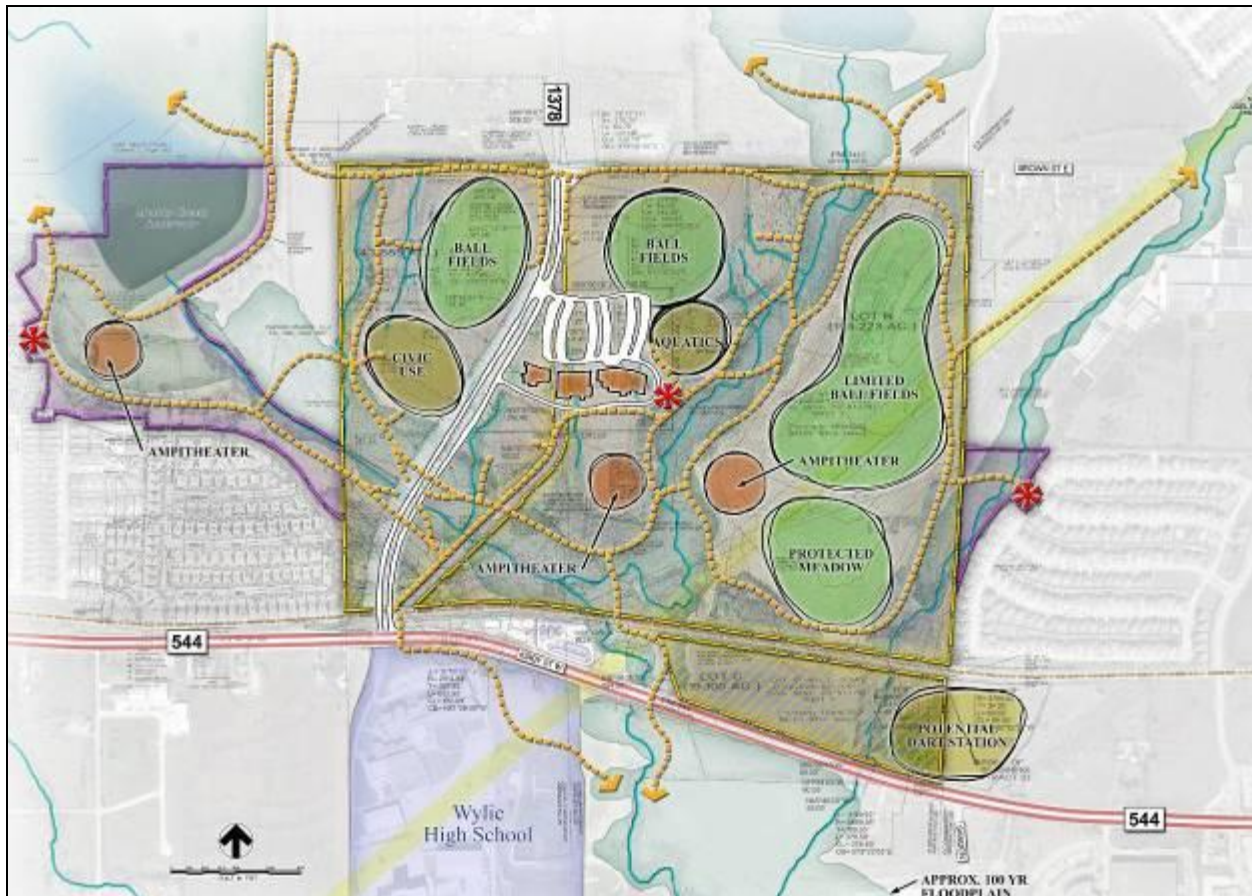
Following the analysis of the physical and vegetative characteristics of the site, a programmatic analysis was performed. This analysis explored different development scenarios for the Municipal Complex Property, each with increasing levels of activity and impact. Each of these scenarios has its own merits and weaknesses but helped inform the development of refined alternatives (described in the next section). The development scenarios are described in further detail below.

Figure 7.2
Low Impact Scenario Diagram



The **Low Impact Scenario** closely follows the habitat management and preservation recommendations established earlier to maximize the amount of site that is dedicated to passive uses. These include uses such as meadow protection, prairie restoration, hard and soft surface trails, and an amphitheater. In all of the scenarios, the dam and spillway area are seen as a key view point, and have the possibility of becoming a signature overlook and amphitheater. The creeks and associated forest are entirely preserved aside from trail connections and possibly minor overlooks and interpretive signage. A large area for a learning center is shown next to the civic complex, which would create synergy between the two uses, and also act as a gateway to the woods for exploration of the natural environment. Feeding off of the new development, an additional civic use area has been designated on the West Meadow which further strengthens the civic complex now occurring on both sides of F.M. 1378.

Figure 7.3
Medium Impact Scenario Diagram



The **Medium Impact Scenario** looks at a higher level of development but is still mostly characterized by low intensity uses. While the forests are still intended to be left intact and managed to maintain their understory openness, large areas of the West and Central Meadows are dedicated to ball fields, helping to meet the City's need to provide more fields. The West Meadow is also shown as having civic use, once again creating synergy between both sides of F.M. 1378, and an aquatics center is proposed as an appendage on the east side of the civic complex. The northern part of the East Meadow is proposed to have limited ball fields, which provide a transition to the protected meadow further south. The limiting factors related to this concept include tight access from Brown Street, relatively steep grades that will require substantial cut and fill, and the power lines that bisect the site. Two possibilities for locating an amphitheater are shown: one just south of the civic complex which would be very visible and be seen as a destination passing through the building's breezeways and another to the west of the forest, taking advantage of the moderately sloping terrain and the attractive backdrop provided by the wooded edge.

Figure 7.4
High Impact Scenario Diagram



The **High Impact Scenario** takes the approach of a “Town Center” type development at the heart of the Municipal Complex Property. The developments around the civic complex would be mainly mixed-use with retail, office, and residential space. “Green corridors” within the mixed-use area lead to the larger trail network beyond, which provides important pedestrian linkages between all the different areas of the site. The idea is for the mixed use development to “grow” out of the civic complex, to feed off of the activity going on throughout the day and becoming lively after hours through restaurants and cafés that keep the development active at night. A limited amount of ball fields are proposed on the East Meadow again transitioning to protected meadow. One can almost imagine looking out from the dam in the evening hours to the town center and hearing the faint sounds of a live band playing and the laughter of nearby residents walking home from dinner along one of the trails.

Client Input

City Council and Parks & Recreation Board - The Planning Team presented the program analysis diagrams discussed on the previous pages and the initial ideas for the Municipal Complex Property to the City Council and the Parks and Recreation Board on October 28, 2008. The Planning Team utilized photographs which convey the aesthetic beauty, habitat quality, and opportunities for nature experiences to help describe existing conditions and explain the various program scenarios. This premise was understood well and the overall consensus was to keep the property natural according to the Low Impact Scenario.

No ball fields of any kind (as shown in the Medium and High Impact Scenarios) were desired, and the idea of mixed use was entertained, but questions arose as to whether or not that would violate the purchase agreement stating that the land be used for civic purposes only. The Planning Team suggested that a 100 year lease agreement may suffice. Many in the meeting questioned intense development stating that it may cause unfair competition with downtown Wylie businesses.

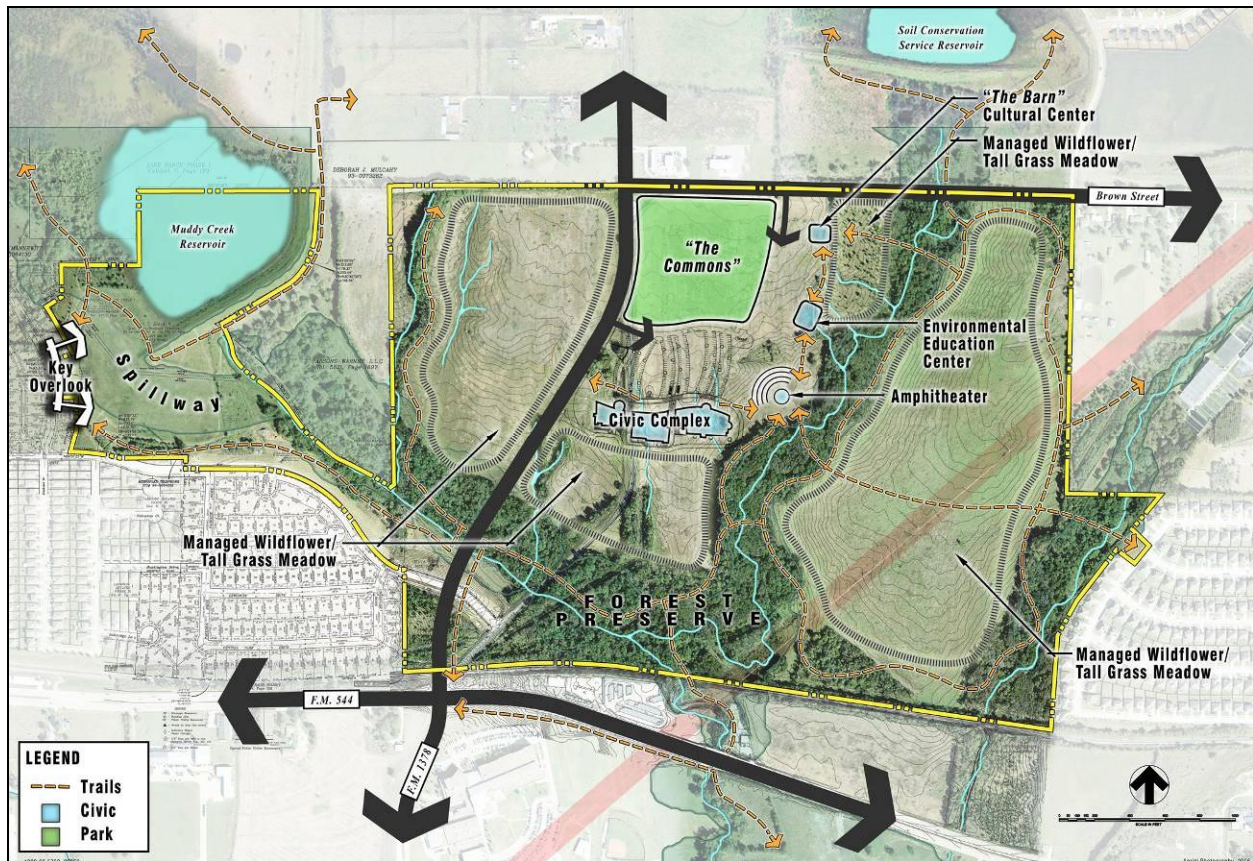
Planning Staff 6 The consultant-led Planning Team presented the results of the site analysis and program analysis to the Planning Department on July 23, 2009. The pros and cons of each of the program analysis scenarios were weighed and discussed. One very significant point of discussion was the impending future development which will eventually occur (largely due to the new civic complex) north of the Municipal Complex Property at the intersection of Brown Street and F.M. 1378. The impact of this future development on the Municipal Complex Property, the need to address and guide such development, and the importance of better addressing how the Municipal Complex Property should interact with surrounding areas came out as important considerations for the future.

Considering the input of the City Council, Parks and Recreation Board, and City Staff, the Planning Team has identified the need to preserve the natural features of the landscape while identifying ways in which the City can be prepared for and accommodate future high-intensity multi-use development near the Municipal Complex Property. This can be done without detracting from the beauty and quality of the natural land beyond, but will require the vision and will to make it happen through appropriate ordinances including setbacks, limited development footprint, stormwater management, and other environmentally conscious development requirements. In addition, programs for the meadows and forested areas to be kept natural, which will help retain the property's current character, should be employed.

FINAL CONCEPT PLAN DEVELOPMENT

Based upon the review and input of City Council, Parks Board and staff, the Planning Team developed the final concept plan.

*Figure 7.5
Final Concept Plan*



The number one goal to be achieved through the Municipal Complex Property Master Plan is **habitat protection**. Through the vegetative and physical analysis of the site, it was discovered that the most interesting and beautiful parts of the property are also the most ecologically sensitive. The creeks are surrounded by majestic canopy trees which are a wonderful natural resource to take advantage of, but (as these areas are easily accessible) extra care must be taken to maintain this environment in its current form. For this to happen, it is crucial to entirely preserve the upland forest associated with the creek corridors while also preserving a 100ø to 150ø wide buffer strip of land around the edges of the forest. Any development in these areas should be limited to trails only. The buffer strip creates an added measure of protection for the creek environment by increasing the amount of time it takes for surface runoff to make its way to the creek and by filtering harmful pollutants and sediment from the runoff before it enters the creek.

Preserving the upland forest areas along the creeks as well as the buffer strip around it not only help to ensure that the environment will continue to thrive in its natural state, but also ensure the continued presence of wildlife within the corridor. This type of area generally provides a multi-layered habitat including trees, shrubs, grass, and herbaceous plants, as well as aquatic habitat, all of which supports a highly diverse array of flora and fauna. In addition to permanent habitat, these areas provide breeding, foraging, and resting areas for all types of birds, insects, reptiles, and mammals, whether permanent or transient. Finally, one of the primary reasons for establishing a buffer strip around these areas is due to the fact that the places where two ecological zones meet are extremely important from a vegetation and wildlife dynamic point of view. Animals may forage in one zone while resting in the other and plants are often adapted to that specific edge zone.

In the designated buffer zones around the upland forests, management practices should be implemented based on the detailed analyses of existing vegetation and soils. As previously mentioned, these practices may range from yearly mowing to introducing an entirely new native seed mix. The large area of open space on the East Meadow is ideal for yearly mowing practices and specific restoration efforts in key areas where soils may tend to erode.

With these principles in mind of preserving the ecologically sensitive parts of the site, an overall theme for the Municipal Complex Property begins to take shape: **“tread lightly on the land.”** Building upon the signature City Hall, Library and Recreation Center, the design of the Municipal Complex Property focuses on striking a balance between high intensity, active areas and low intensity, passive areas in order to make the most of this new civic destination. The intent of the design is to purposely link the civic uses together in a looping pattern, hugging the edge of the woods like a string of pearls.

Visual recognition is a key point in determining the layout of the site. Approaching the intersection of Brown and F.M. 1378, the Commons acts like a grand front yard for the civic complex and associated buildings. This open space functions as a space where the history and culture of Wylie are to be celebrated. Imagine a group of horses (real horses or sculptures of horses) in the space and a split-rail fence, likening back to historical Wylie when ranches and open space was the norm. Serving as the cultural center, the Barn is a facility with exhibits, artwork, and historical artifacts geared toward strengthening the bond everyday citizens have with their city. The environmental education center south of The Barn is another link in the string of pearls where programs that look after and maintain the vegetation on site can be managed; this can also be the location from which guided tours of the area originate and community outreach programs are held. A Friends of The Municipal Complex Property type organization can be a way of ensuring kids and adults alike are able to come to the area, explore, and learn about all the important ecological features readily on display here. Moving to the amphitheater, this facility utilizes the proximity of the civic complex to attract visitors for outdoor performances, summer evening movies, weddings, or any number of other uses. The enclosure of the trees makes this space feel comfortable and inviting.

Walkability from within the civic complex and all throughout the site is important as this should be a very pedestrian oriented destination. As per the educational importance of the property and its management practices, it is important to provide trail connections throughout the preserved

areas in a way that is less impactful on the landscape. "Cow paths" are typical when users want to make their own way throughout the forest; to avoid this, boardwalks should be considered in the more sensitive areas such as next to the creek or through a prairie restoration area.

Overall this plan recognizes the civic complex as the catalyst for a new "City Center" that embodies not only City government, but also creates a destination for recreation while celebrating the cultural and natural heritage of the City of Wylie. The end result will be a strong sense of community and increased quality of life for Wylie residents.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

In order to realize the vision set forth for the Municipal Complex Property in an efficient manner, certain implementation strategies should be considered.

Suggested Phasing

Due to its size and layout, phasing is an important part of implementing the master plan for the Municipal Complex Property. It is important to establish certain aspects of the design early-on in the process to maintain the overall integrity of the master plan.

Phase One: Consists of hike and bike trails throughout the portions of the site intended to be left in a natural state and the implementation of signage for educational purposes and protective measures. Examples of this include interpretive signs identifying native plants or stream dynamics, establishing important viewpoints, and boardwalks and/or "no-access zones" through the most sensitive areas.

Phase Two: Consists of establishing "The Commons," the amphitheater, and the environmental learning center, which will make up one half of the civic ring. With the protective measures in place from Phase One, the environmental learning center will become a gateway to experience the landscape itself, and the amphitheater and commons will provide the finishing touches to make the Municipal Complex Property a true destination.